

You Choose

Free Will vs. State Coercion

by Denyse O’Leary

After forty years’ study of humans and primate apes, Stanford professor of neurology Robert Sapolsky, author of *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will* (2023), announced that “We are nothing more or less than the sum of that which we could not control—our biology, our environments, their interactions.” Sam Harris, a well-known atheist and neuroscientist, agrees: “Free will is an illusion.”



Denial of free will is popular among scientists generally and is probably the majority view among neuroscientists. As a result, many will assume that free will has somehow been refuted by science. Actually, no. As neurosurgeon Michael Egnor and I explain in *The Immortal Mind: A Neurosurgeon’s Case for the Existence of the Soul* (2025), denial is an ideological fashion. It is not a rationally consistent belief.

Problems with Denial

Here are some of the reasons we give.

The Logic Problem: If our thoughts and choices really are wholly determined, what follows? Even the statement “Free will doesn’t exist” cannot coherently be argued as true or false any more than a moaning wind might be true or false. If we lack free will and our thoughts are determined wholly by the laws of physics and chemistry, then we cannot make any valid argument. Free will denial is part and parcel to a logically self-refuting suicide of the intellect.

The Physics Problem: Over a century of modern physics has established that our universe is not, at bottom, wholly determined. In 2022, physicists Alain Aspect, John F. Clauser, and Anton Zeilinger received the Nobel Prize in Physics for experiments establishing that at the most fundamental

level, nature is governed by probabilities and not certainties. Thus it follows that human choices are not rigidly bound up in strict laws of physics.

The Neuroscience Failure to Rule It Out: Wilder Penfield (1891–1976), a pioneer neurosurgeon, noticed something significant when he was stimulating patients’ brains during *awake* surgery (generally performed to treat epilepsy). An awake patient could always tell whether Penfield had caused her limb to move by stimulating a part of her brain or whether she had freely chosen to move it herself. After more than eleven hundred surgeries, Penfield was not able to find a center in the brain where the “will” could be located. Originally a materialist, he later inferred that the will does not arise in the brain but is a power of an immaterial mind.¹

The neuroscientist we most often hear about in connection with free will studies is Benjamin Libet (1916–2007). Introductory psychology students may well be taught that he disproved free will. He himself disagreed. What he found was a detectable “readiness potential” that appeared in the brain just before an experimental subject decided to push a button. But his later research showed that no such potential arose if the subject decided *not* to push the button. So he famously quipped that he couldn’t say for sure

that he had proved the reality of free will, but he had proved the reality of “free won’t!”

Later research in this area took a different tack, focusing on the relative importance of a decision. Pushing a button in Libet’s lab incurred no real-life consequences, but what about decisions entailing significant consequences? Researchers found something very interesting: meaningless choices were preceded by a readiness potential, but meaningful choices were not.³ When we care about a decision and its outcome, our brain appears to behave differently.

Given that free will matters most to us when we are making important decisions, it is surely significant that the important decisions did not seem to have a material correlate. If anything, such research findings support free will.

Critical to Freedom

Much of the Western world today, even Britain, is flirting with a totalitarian temptation: if we are nothing but meat puppets molded by time and chance, why shouldn’t the government mold us instead of us molding our government? That would include managing our ideas. For example, many in the United States, including Vice President J. D. Vance, are looking on with dismay as Britain now arrests thousands for social media posts—while crimes against real persons spiral out of control.⁴ This only makes sense in a totalitarian context. Governments groping toward totalitarian control are much more concerned with the spread of wrongthink than they are with their citizens’ safety.

In *The Immortal Mind*, we argue that the totalitarian temptation stems from a rejection of the reality and importance of free will. Prominent historian Yuval Noah Harari goes so far as to claim that the very idea of free will is dangerous: “If governments and corporations succeed in hacking the human

animal, the easiest people to manipulate will be those who believe in free will.”⁵

Some may comfort themselves with the notion that the government only shuts down obnoxious people. But they probably haven’t reckoned with the next steps. The 2002 film *Minority Report* assumes that incarcerating people *before* they have committed crimes is strange, but it makes perfect sense in a totalitarian light. The inevitable protest, “But I’m innocent!”, is meaningless apart from free will—without free will, we are never guilty or innocent. Nonetheless, authorities may take it upon themselves to forestall a perceived future risk, perhaps by incarcerating whole classes of people, as was done in the Soviet gulags.

Similarly, if free will doesn’t exist, disagreement with the government can be redefined as irrational—the output of a badly functioning brain. The Soviet Union, for example, “medicalized” dissent by forcibly institutionalizing political and religious dissenters as psychiatric patients who were unable to reason correctly.

The trend is slower in the United States, but real. And these changes need not happen by violence. Societies whose inhabitants don’t explicitly affirm free will may just drift toward totalitarianism. Pundits and politicians alike are tempted by the idea that, if there is no higher power or greater reality to whom we must give an answer, they can force people to fulfill their visions with impunity. And there is more than government coercion that is at issue here. Overcoming addictions and sorting out conflicts and troubled relationships are a much greater challenge if the underlying assumption is that we do not have the inner capacity to change.

The Greater Danger

Yuval Noah Harari is wrong, and not just in his belief about free will. It is the denial of free will that presents the greater danger to humanity because it is free will-denying elitists who tend to become the most abusive manipulators of the masses.

Free will is real. It is a natural faculty of our immaterial minds. We can use or abuse it, but it cannot simply cease to exist. ☉

Notes

1. Wilder Penfield, *The Mystery of the Mind: A Critical Study of Consciousness and the Human Brain* (Princeton Legacy Library, 2015), 76–77.
2. Benjamin Libet, “Do We Have Free Will?,” in *Conscious Will and Responsibility: A Tribute to Benjamin Libet*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Lynn Nadel (online ed., Oxford Academic, Jan. 1, 2011).
3. Uri Maoz et al., “Neural Precursors of Decisions That Matter—an ERP Study of Deliberate and Arbitrary Choice,” *eLife* (Oct. 23, 2019).
4. Paul Coleman, “J.D. Vance Was Right About Censorship,” *The Critic* (Jun. 3, 2025).
5. Yuval Noah Harari, “The Myth of Freedom,” *The Guardian* (Sep. 14, 2018).

